

the medical papyri until the one written in Coptic; in possession of the French Archæological School at Cairo, is published by its editor, M. Chassinat.

The curious nature of the old recipes is compared by Dr. Reissner with those used to-day among the ignorant fellahin; to these should now be added a list just published by Captain Stanley, R.A.M.C., in his report upon the Oasis of Siwa.

### Restrictions concerning Circumcision under the Romans.

By JOSEPH OFFORD.

STUDENTS of medical matters in Roman times are familiar with the rescript of the Emperor Antoninus concerning the acts of circumcision and castration so prevalent at his period.<sup>1</sup> Much further light has now been thrown upon the administration of his law by a number of papyri recently discovered in Egypt. That country was a province where the edict was especially provocative, because not only its Jewish inhabitants but all the numerous priestly families who were worshippers of the ancient deities had practised the rite of circumcision from time immemorial.

The decision of Antoninus to restrict the practice as far as good statesmanship rendered possible, was not the first imperial effort of the kind, because Hadrian, at least, had endeavoured to stop all such mutilations. In his time, the luxury of having eunuchs, a system *de ménage* imported by Romans from the East, had become so frequent, that it threatened to diminish the population, and so he made the act of castration a capital crime. He also attempted to prohibit circumcision, because of the Jewish propaganda of the rite, to which his Hebrew subjects, after the dispersion under Titus, attached great importance, making it indispensable for converts, and imposing it upon their slaves. Many Romans were tempted to become Jews, owing to the numerous privileges that people still possessed, but what was Hadrian's chief

<sup>1</sup> (a) Circumcidere Judæis filios suos tantum rescripto Divi Pii permittitur, in non ejusdem religionis qui hoc fecerint castrantes poena irrogatur (Digest 48). (b) Cives Romani qui se Judaico ritu vel servos suos circumcidere patiuntur bonis adeptis in insulam perpetuo relegantur. Medici capita puniuntur Judæi, si alienae nationis comparatos servos circumciderint, aut deportantur, aut capite puniuntur (Pauli Sententiae, v, xxii).



Relief from the sixth dynasty Egyptian tomb of Ankh-Ma-Hor, at Sakkara; about 3000 B.C.; showing operation of circumcision. (From a photograph kindly lent by Dr. F. M. Sandwith.)

objection, except to its reducing the number of nominal Roman citizens, is not quite clear.<sup>1</sup> He held to his point, however, and Spartianus suggests it was the cause of the great Jewish rebellion of his reign.

Antoninus's rescript was more reasonable and practical politically. The Jewish religion being legally licensed, Jews were, by it, allowed to circumcise their offspring, but not their non-Hebrew slaves; such a deed was assimilated to castration, and the punishment was death for "humiliores": relegation for "honestiores." Romans might adopt the Jews' religion, but must neither circumcise themselves nor their slaves.<sup>2</sup> Confiscation of their wealth and banishment to an island were the penalties. Further, any medical man performing the operation was executed. This law of Antoninus has hitherto been thought to have been specially, if not entirely, anti-Jewish, but this was not so, and it is from this point of view that the evidence of the new papyri becomes so valuable.

The rescript applied to all peoples and countries in the Empire, but more particularly to Egypt, because of the frequency of circumcision therein. The number of papyri connected with this law already edited is a proof of this, there being three known at Geneva, one at Strasburg, two at Berlin, and two in the Tebtunis collection. These documents date from A.D. 155 to 189, showing that the rescript, the definite date of which is not known, was promulgated before 155, and remained in force at least until Commodus.

In ancient Egypt, circumcision was obligatory for the priesthood, but merely permissible for the laity. The Roman rescript prohibited it for the laity and for all but genuine Egyptian priests and Jews, the Emperor wisely not wishing to offend either the powerful priestly hierarchy or the influential Jewish community. But the operation was to be, as far as possible, restricted, and to achieve this the papyri prove that the permit was solely vested in the power of the official high priest, a sort of minister of worship who was not an Egyptian, but a Roman bureaucrat who, though residing at Alexandria, yet had authority over every Egyptian temple.

The manner of securing obedience to the rescript in Egypt is clearly disclosed by the papyri, showing that, instead of the decision of permit to circumcise being left to each temple for its hierophant's ruling, only

<sup>1</sup> "Codex Justinianus," forbade the practice to Roman citizens who had become Jewish converts.

<sup>2</sup> Flavius Clemens, nephew of Titus and Domitian, who, with Domitilla, became Jews, suffered death, Gratz states, because he was circumcised. See *Gesch.*, iv, pp. 403-70.

the high priest could grant permission. Thus the whole matter was securely swept into the Roman executive net. To reduce the number of applications, a series of necessary formalities was devised, and these the papyri explain. First a written request, *βισλίδιον*, had to be forwarded to the (nome) county magistrate, or to the strategus, or their *locum tenens ad interim*. Thus a Tebtunis papyrus of A.D. 189 concerns a priestess, Isidora, wife of a priest, and preserves her appeal to the strategus of the Arsinoite nome, and omitting unimportant words runs thus:—

“Wishing to circumcise my son Pakekbis, son of Cronion, and grandson of Harpocraton, a priest exempt from tribute; intended to succeed to the office of prophet in the temple; and also Paneses, son of my deceased maternal uncle. I pray you, as usual, to write to the great high priest in order to obtain authorization to circumcise these two children and accomplish the appropriate holy ceremonies. This current year the children have: Pakekbis, seven years; Paneses, eleven years. My husband, the aforesaid Cronion, is absent at Alexandria, will bring them before his highness the high priest.”

The request should have emitted from the children's father, but, if it were impossible, from another near member of the family. Isidora thus presented both, because her husband was away, and the other youth's father was deceased.

The main proofs presented to achieve permit were those of sacerdotal familyship. The most suitable documents for this purpose were the census returns, wherein were inscribed every person's name, affiliation, and status. Secondly, the attestation by a number of priests at the same shrine, or in the same county. They had their own temple archives setting forth the parentage and the name of one of the five temple tribes, of which the candidate had to be a member. The papyri prove that under Antoninus these statements as to status might be made verbally, but by the time of Commodus an inscribed and sworn testimony was necessary.

It is a curious fact that application to circumcise one of these lads, Panesis, appears to have been made one or two years earlier, and not granted, because the annexed text from the second Tebtunis papyrus contains the certificate of four temple dignitaries requesting to obtain the permit to circumcise the boy, and shows that at the date of this document his father Marepsemis was still living; it is given as a specimen of such records:—

“From Cronion, son of Pakekbis, son of Harpocraton, deputy

prophet, and from Maron, son of Cronion, son of Harpocraton, and Maron, son of Maron, son of Marepsemis, and Pakekbis, son of Cronion, son of Psoiphis, the three last being priests, all four from the famous exempted temple of the village Tebtunis. With regard to the application presented to you by Marepsemis, son of Marsisuchus, son of Harpocraton, priest of the said temple, requesting that his son Panesis by Thenpakekbis, daughter of Panesis, should be circumcised, in reply to your inquiry whether he is of a priestly family and ought to be circumcised, we declare on oath by the fortune of Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antoninus Augustus that he is in truth of priestly family, and that the proofs submitted by him are genuine, and that he ought to be circumcised, because he cannot perform the sacred offices unless this is done; otherwise may we be liable to the consequences of the oath."

The augmented legal formalities had for object to diminish the applications, for it was not necessary for all members of priestly families to be circumcised, but only those actually engaged in the cult of the gods. Many members were merely outdoor or inferior employees of temples, such as shepherds, gardeners, cultivators, builders, decorators, and mummifiers. It was only for ritual priests who personally approached the Deity that the Romans granted the rite. They could refuse it to the others without exciting religious fanaticism, and aptly did so.

The setting forth of the child's age in the papyri proves that there was a legal age limit, and they refer to such various ages as 1, 2, 5, 8, 7, and 11 years, indicating that for circumcising any age preceding puberty was permissible. Ambrose and Philo say the age for the operation was 13 and 14 years—evidently an error.<sup>1</sup> If the local inquiry was satisfactory, the strategus forwarded a summary of the proofs to the high priest. In papyri at Geneva and Strasburg we now possess such summaries.

Finally, the applicant had to present himself with the child at Alexandria, a great expense to residents in Upper Egypt. An indulgence on this point appears to have sometimes been granted, for a letter runs thus on the subject:—

"You are not ignorant of the anxiety I had in arranging the circumcision affair, but thanks to the valuable help of friends, we have managed it."

<sup>1</sup> They may have meant for Jewish youths only.

At Alexandria the high priest recited the report in favour, and then examined the boys to see if any of their bodies bore any blemish (*σημεία*), corporal perfection being most important. He could not decide in doubtful cases such a theological matter, and so if he saw minor marks, a jury of priests, or the *ιερογραμματεῖς*, attached to his office examined the candidate.

A Geneva papyrus records a curious case: one boy had no *σημεία*, but some cicatrices (*οὐλὰς*); and there does not seem to have been a precedent for such a case in the sacred books. The papyrus passage preserving the decision is much mutilated, but the investigation seems to have been adjourned to see if the blemishes disappeared.

A satisfactory application was notified by the high priest to the local strategus in this wise:—

“Year 22 of our lord Aurelius Commodus Antoninus Cæsar; 21 of Thoth. Pacusis, a priest, has presented his son Horus of the Heracleid district of the Arsinoite nome requesting permission to circumcise him. Seeing he has deposited the proofs with the nome secretary and written a letter on the subject, Julianus has inquired of the hierogrammats if the child bears any marks. They replied ‘No.’ I, Julianus, high priest of temples, having countersigned the letter, have ordered the child to be circumcised according to custom.”

A copy of such a perinit as this was given to the party concerned, and a duplicate one deposited in archives of the high priest at Alexandria.

Doubtless the Egyptian officials and scribes devised numerous technicalities and legal difficulties in the composing and verifying of documents, upon finding that their Roman superiors desired to diminish the number of circumcisions, and for the purpose of obtaining baksheesh from those applicants who secured permission in consequence of all the literary formalities having been duly provided for perusal.